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ABSTRACT

Excerpts from interviews with four women mentors in academe illustrate a common, problematic syndrome which involves resistance to assuming the position of master. Each of the women expressed a profound discomfort with the idea of being considered an "expert" and each resisted the role in her own way. Sarah had adopted a stance of distance with her own students and with her mentors. Roberta adhered to a "sponsorship" position to help define the boundaries between her personal and professional lives. Debbie, who resisted the idea that as a mentor she should be an all-knowing expert, saw herself as a "co-investigator" who was drawn into collaboration as an alternative. And Maria, faced with the blunt reality of discrimination as a Mexican and part-time graduate student, felt that a good mentor is not an expert but an advocate who is in a position to help students succeed in spite of discrimination. (NH)

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Resisting Mastery

What I am going to read are exerpts from a series of interviews on mentoring which I recently conducted with women in academe, and which I hope raise some issues we can discuss. But before I describe their positions, I would like to clarify my title, "Resisting Mastery," which carries at least two connotations. Most obvious, perhaps, is the idea of resistance to *being* mastered; this is an important issue for mentoring, but it is not my focus here. My interest, rather, is to discuss resistance to *assuming the position of master*, which is a common, but problematic, synonym for mentor. This is important, I think, because in spite of their many differences, the four women who are represented here all expressed a profound discomfort with the idea that they might be considered "experts." What I would like to do, then, briefly, is to give you an idea of ways these women have proposed to resist that role.

Sarah

Sarah is a 31-year-old Anglo-American, working on her PhD in English. She is studying, among other things, slavery and slave narratives, and her work in this area has significantly informed her perspective on her mentoring experiences. Sarah tells me that "I've known from the beginning that I'm just doing this [graduate school] for me. I'm not just drifting aimlessly--'what should I do?' I really have a goal with this." In spite of this commitment, however, two negative mentoring relationships in her graduate school experience (one with a

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man, one with a woman) have forced her to re-evaluate why she is in school. Sarah describes herself as "not really a lesbian, but not straight either." This ambiguity, in her opinion, may have contributed to some of the "bizarre, power-gender issues" she has had to confront in her relationships with two of her mentors and other professors. Several of her mentoring relationships, she claims, have had a strong sexual subtext. Part of this has had to do with the fact that as a bisexual woman, she is defined *as sexual*, which, in her opinion, has affected the way her mentors treat her: "I know a lot about two or three professors' sex lives," she says. "*A lot*. But I doubt if they helped me with anything that I needed to learn. And I'm not going to write a dissertation on their sex lives."

Because of her experiences, and because she acknowledges that hers is only one side of the story, Sarah has adopted a stance of distance with her own students and with her mentors. She says that she is now very aware when she finds herself in situations that mirror her own mentoring experiences. That is, she has become much more sensitive to power imbalances between her and her students: "It made such a strong impression on me that I don't think I will ever be able to forget it when I'm in this position [of mentor]," she says. While Sarah admits that there are disadvantages to keeping a distance, she nonetheless insists that it is more important for her to maintain it than to risk, as she puts it, similarly "nightmarish" entanglements.

Roberta

Roberta is a 32-year-old white woman from England. She is a certified teacher of the deaf and is currently pursuing a PhD in special education; she also supervises undergraduate student teachers in that area. Because Roberta occupies a position in which she is both a mentor and a mentee, she prefers a model of mentoring based on the notion of sponsorship, which comes from her

experience with 12-step recovery programs. Unlike other mentoring relationships she has had, Roberta says that this position has helped her to define the boundaries between her personal and professional lives, both with her students and with her own mentors. One reason she likes the idea of sponsorship is because "[it] is not a credential that's held, or that is bestowed on a person." Furthermore, it emphasizes a constant process of *becoming*, whereas in her opinion traditional mentoring emphasizes a final state of "arrival"--a concept which, according to Roberta, is both frightening and deceptive. She says,

> I'm trying to know it all and appear to know it all and take responsibility for that and it's terrifying. Because *I* know I don't know it all. And so I'm hiding and trying to think, "What would someone else say?" and then say it. And I'm not able to really be myself with all my *not* knowing and all my uncertainty and my evolving thoughts.

Roberta points out that she sees her role as facilitating students in finding *their own* answers to whatever questions they have, as well as their own processes in reaching those answers--regardless of whether those answers and processes match hers. Thus Roberta sees sponsorship as an effective model for her mentoring activities mainly because, as she puts it, "[sponsors] are not *experts* in any sense, there isn't any *right* way, but there was probably the *right* way for that individual and they can talk about that." Indeed, Roberta claims that she has deliberately chosen *not* to see herself as a mentor in the traditional sense, because "The responsibility that goes with that much power is more than I feel like taking on." Ultimately, Roberta sees sponsorship as empowering for both the mentor and mentee. It has limits, however, which for her are precisely what make it valuable: it isn't "about being friends . . . that's not the point," she explains. "It's basically about skills for living."

Debbie

Debbie is a 35-year-old Anglo-American who teaches graduate courses in teacher education. As she finishes her first year as a professor, however, she has begun to re-evaluate the values of the university and her identity within academe:

> It's almost as if, my whole life, I've equated my job with me. And I'm struggling now being a newly-married person who's never lived with her husband before to realize how much more to life there is than job. But I've never been able to really separate myself from my work. And so the good feelings that I have about myself are tied to my work.

Because she feels that she has not yet "arrived" in her career, Debbie is torn between what she *wants* to do in her profession, and what the university will *allow* her to do. And as she moves into the role of mentor, after having *been* mentored for several years as a graduate student, Debbie is looking for ways to make personal and professional fulfillment more compatible.

Debbie describes her past mentoring experiences as dominated by the equation "mentor equals advice-giver. . . . My mentors have been people who have given me guidelines to live my life by as a teacher." However, Debbie feels that the advice she received from her mentors often reflected *their* interests, not hers. For example, when she decided to get her PhD, Debbie was torn between going into English and going into teacher education. When she sought out the perspectives of her professors, she says, their common advice was: "You are making a big mistake if you don't stay in an English Department. You are setting yourself up for an inferior position if you go into education. You're not gonna have a good life." Debbie liked and respected her professors, and felt like she

had learned a great deal from them, but realizes now "that I was just standing in awe of them, of the knowledge they were delivering to me." These days, Debbie says she mistrusts the idea that mentors should be all-knowing experts, and prefers to view herself as a facilitator. "I have some stories to tell," Debbie says. "I'm not sure that I have advice to give. It's easy to slip into that, you know, 'Well, if I were you, this is what I would do.' I find myself saying that sometimes and it really bothers me because I think everyone has an individual path that they have to follow." Uncomfortable with the pressure of being a "master" of her field, Debbie likes to see herself as a "co-investigator" or "co-conspirator," and thus is drawn to collaboration as an alternative to traditional mentoring. In spite of this, she expresses some concern that collaborative mentoring relationships will ever be valued in academe: " I don't think there can be good alternatives [to mentoring] until we think hard about the system that we're in."

Maria

Maria is a 53-year-old Mexican graduate student. She teaches full-time at a public bilingual middle school, and is finishing coursework for a certification in bilingual learning disabilities. She describes her frustration with the fact that, in her experience, professors don't take part-time students seriously, and that they treat her with condescension and impatience because of her age. Perhaps even more problematic is what Maria describes as the "*blunt*, really blunt discrimination" she has suffered as a non-white, female student. She was completely unprepared for such treatment in college because, as she tells me, "My father was a physician, and all my brothers are. And so we had a socioeconomic class [in Mexico] where I wasn't used to anyone looking down on me."

Believing this discrimination to be too unbearable to endure and too pervasive to eliminate, Maria dropped out of the university for several years. It wasn't until she returned that she found what she considered a good mentor--a male professor from South America who, Maria explains, "understands the [Latino] culture, and understands our thinking." This man acted as an advocate for Maria and other minority students in her department. Maria appreciated this, but admitted that sometimes she was embarrassed to need so much help. "It's always discouraging," she says. Most of her professors "had never had any contact with people from other ethnic backgrounds. So it was like, 'Here, you've got someone with an accent, they must be stupid, you know, cannot make the grade.' Or, "What are they doing here if they don't speak correctly?'" For Maria, a good mentor is not an expert, but an advocate. Because, she points out, Anglo males comprise the majority of PhD-holders in the public schools, and because Anglos *and* males inhabit most positions of power at the university, minority groups--including women--need to have mentors who understand their frustrations and the forms of discrimination they suffer, and who are in positions to help students succeed in spite of them.